



2018: a Step Change in Obesity

The reality

Obesity and overweight have increased dramatically over the last few decades. The World Obesity Federation estimates that, by 2025, 2.4 billion adults and 270 million school-age children will be above a healthy weight, and of these 850 million adults and 90 million school-age children will have obesity.¹

Obesity is a disease in its own right, as well as a risk factor for a range of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and many cancers. It takes a serious toll on individual and population health and is straining already overburdened health systems: by 2025, the annual global medical bill for treating the consequences of obesity is expected to reach US\$1.2 trillion.² It is a global disease that demands global solutions. #obeseplanet

The 2018 High-Level Meeting on NCDs

2018 could be a pivotal year for awareness and action on non-communicable diseases, including obesity, as the United Nations will hold its *third High-Level Meeting (HLM) on NCDs* – an important opportunity for advocacy. It is expected to take place in September, immediately following the UN General Assembly, and is hoped to attract heads of state and government and ministers of health and development to discuss prevention and treatment of NCDs. The Outcome Document of the HLM will be negotiated in the months preceding the Meeting; this will shape international priorities in NCDs and direct action and accountability of national governments.

The HLM is an opportunity for World Obesity members to mobilise as part of civil society, lobbying our governments (head of state or government or health/development ministers) to attend the High-Level Meeting and encouraging them to commit to practical action. Governments should be held to account on their commitments on NCDs and obesity.

Taking advantage of increased interest

The High-Level Meeting demonstrates the *growing interest in NCDs and obesity* over the last few years (see Timeline).

- There is now an international NCD framework: *a target on obesity* is included as one of nine voluntary targets to which all WHO member states committed in 2013 (see Box) – but which all countries are currently set to miss.
- The *Sustainable Development Goals* include a target on NCDs (see Box); obesity is not specifically mentioned, but there are many relevant targets, such as ending malnutrition in all its forms and access to green spaces in cities.
- In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a set of *Best Buys in Non-communicable Disease*, such as taxing the commercial determinants of health (including sugary drinks).
- There is also interest in tackling obesity at regional level – for example, WHO Europe³ – and in cities and local communities – such as Amsterdam.⁴

Childhood obesity is an important gateway to improving understanding, awareness and empathy around obesity:

- the WHO Director-General established a Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO), which reported in 2017;
- in 2012, WHO Member States endorsed global targets for improving maternal, infant and young child nutrition, including on childhood obesity⁵ (see Box);

¹ World Obesity Federation estimates. See http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/6599c5_bb7a9ea531824bcf93746be7413c03aa.pdf and T. Lobstein and R. Jackson-Leach, 'Planning for the worst: estimates of obesity and comorbidities in school-age children in 2025' (2016) *Paediatric Obesity* 11(5): 321–5: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ijpo.12185>

² World Obesity Federation estimates. See http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/6599c5_2a8fa0968efd4854b74f399abb3078c0.pdf

³ <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity>

⁴ Amsterdam Healthy Weight Programme: <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/organisatie/sociaal/onderwijs-jeugd-zorg/zo-blijven-wij/amsterdam-healthy/>.

⁵ WHO, *Comprehensive Implementation Plan for Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition* – see <http://www.who.int/nutrition/global-target-2025/en/>



- the G20 group of nations, under the presidency of Argentina, has chosen child obesity as one of its key health workstream priorities for 2018; and
- the NCD Alliance (a network of more than 2,000 NCD organisations globally, and of which World Obesity is a member) has developed a set of six advocacy priorities ahead of the High-Level Meeting – one of which is childhood obesity.⁶

Global Action Plan on the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013–20 target on obesity:

- [By 2025] halt the rise in diabetes and obesity [at 2010 levels]

Global Nutrition Targets 2025:

- Target: No increase in childhood overweight [from 2010 levels]

Sustainable Development Goals target on NCDs:

- By 2030, reduce by one third [from 2015 levels] premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being.

Current concerns

There are a number of specific concerns that could and should be urgently addressed:

- Obesity and NCDs are internationally acknowledged as a priority, but *translation of these aspirations into national policy, health systems and community-level action priority and policymaking* is proving challenging – and governments are not held to account on their delivery.
- *NCDs, including obesity, are too often dismissed as ‘diseases of affluence’. But this is simply not the case.* In low- and middle-income countries, obesity rates are rising rapidly, often with overweight adults and underweight children living in the same households and communities. In higher-income countries, deprived populations have the highest rates of obesity and overweight – driven by a lack of opportunity, access and time to be physically active and eat a healthy diet, and by an oversupply of cheap, nutritionally poor, processed food.
- *Obesogenic environments (not personal lifestyle choices) are the primary driver of obesity.* Creating a health-conducive society requires active involvement, engagement and understanding from beyond the health sector. The HLM is a chance to highlight the need to reshape our societies towards health.
- Stigma and weight bias are endemic and profoundly unhelpful. Discrimination against people with obesity (including by health professionals) is common, leading to depression and anxiety, and undermining the confidence and agency that are so important in maintaining a healthy weight in an obesogenic society. *It is time to turn around this narrative of blame, focusing instead on positive stories, and hearing the voices and insights of people with lived experience of obesity.*
- Even where there is misleading prevailing rhetoric around ‘individual responsibility’, *children* are recognised as needing support from society to prevent and to treat obesity. This can be the start of a change in social norms and attitudes, promoting a shift towards improving access to and availability of healthier diets and lifelong physical activity. And what helps children to maintain a healthy weight will, over time, reduce adult obesity.
- There are strong calls, spearheaded by WHO, for *Universal Health Coverage (UHC)* – that everyone can receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship.⁷ Prevention, treatment and care of NCDs, including obesity, should be embedded within these essential health services. A lack of understanding among policymakers about the causes and consequences of obesity, and of the benefits of good prevention and treatment, mean that obesity is insufficiently prioritised. Among health professionals, a lack of confidence in talking with patients about obesity means that it may not even be diagnosed.
- There are opportunities to highlight obesity within new fields of research such as Planetary Health, which investigates ways in which a more health-promoting environment can also address ‘the biggest global

⁶ NCD Alliance, *Presentation: 2018 UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs: Why, What and How?* (2018)

https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/HLM_CampaignPriorities_Presentation_FINAL.pdf

⁷ WHO Factsheet on Universal Health Coverage (2017): <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs395/en/>



health threat of the 21st century': climate change.⁸ The co-benefits of active travel and healthy, sustainable diets for the health of people and planet are myriad. This will be addressed in the Lancet Commission on Obesity (to be published later in the year) and calls for 'triple-duty actions' (concurrently addressing under-nutrition, over-nutrition and climate change) are growing.

*2018 is a staging post on the journey towards better prevention and treatment of NCDs, including obesity.
Let's make the most of the opportunity!*

Further information

- A. The first UN High-Level Meeting 2011: http://www.who.int/nmh/events/un_ncd_summit2011/en/
- B. Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013–20: http://www.who.int/nmh/events/ncd_action_plan/en/
- C. Sustainable Development Goals: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>
- D. Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016–25: <http://www.who.int/nutrition/decade-of-action/en/>
- E. Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO): <http://www.who.int/end-childhood-obesity/en/>
- F. WHO, Best Buys in Non-Communicable Disease (2017 edition): <http://www.who.int/ncds/management/best-buys/en/>
- G. G20 Working Group on Health: <https://www.g20.org/en/g20-argentina/work-streams/health>
- H. Third UN High-Level Meeting, September 2018: <http://www.who.int/ncds/governance/third-un-meeting/en/>
- I. Lancet Commission on Obesity: <https://www.worldobesity.org/what-we-do/lancetcommission/>

⁸ A. Costello et al., 'Managing the health effects of climate change' (2009) *The Lancet* 373(9676): 1693–733
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(09\)60935-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(09)60935-1/fulltext)

NCDs/obesity timeline

